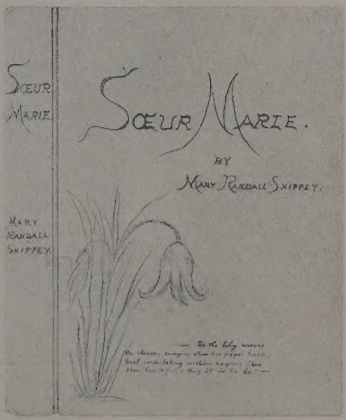
SŒUR MARIE

BY MARY RANDALL SHIPPEY

"So the lily moves
On slender, swaying stem her regal head,
Each undulating motion saying: 'See
How beautiful a thing it is to be!'"—

ROBERT GRIER COOKE

Soeur Marie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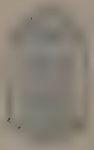

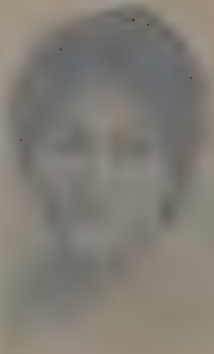

Soeur Marie

A Poem

BY

MARY RANDALL SHIPPEY

Robert Grier Cooke
NEW YORK
MDCDIV

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Foreword

The author of Sœur Marie has solved the problem of the soul that she sought to explain:—Eight years ago she passed from this life. The poem is an original attempt, of a woman, to give an answer to the questions of the soul. It owes little to books, but much to conversation and experience of the heart. There will be found in the poem a minor tone of music running through its lines apart from the incident and metre—who can say? Does not the soul in Earth-life, now and then, come clearly to knowledge and expression of itself? It is always insistent, but material needs engross the intellect and rarely can the soul compel recognition. A few through the ages have kept truth, some find it, and it is given when it will be received.

Soeur Marie

I KNEW her only as a gray-garbed nun
Whose gentle mission took her wheresoe'er
A wearied body or grief-sickened heart
Had need of rest and that sure healing wrought
By her soft touch and low sweet-cadenced voice.

By what thrice-blessèd chance she came to be
The star that fixed my life's uncertain course,
Were briefly told:—The kindly, keen-eyed friend
Whose ready skill to read the cause of things
Beneath their seeming, came thro' many years
Of ceaseless work among his suffering kind,
Discerned my need and sent me Sœur Marie.
"A nurse for you." So said the kind, keen eyes
When first they saw my languid look infold
The restful garb and quiet, tender face.
No more it seemed a thing to question then,
To my sick heart and thought-refusing brain,
Than if he'd shut a rose, dew-kissed, within
My helpless hand and said, " a flower for you."

How many days and nights she patient watched
Within that darkened room, I never knew;
For memory dates from that fair morning when
Like one new-born, I woke to know and feel
The something more that marked the watcher there
From those gray shapes that peopled all my dreams.

How soft she moved with that sure poise and grace
No art can teach but only consciousness
Of having found the mission and the place
By Heaven intended. So the lily moves
On slender, swaying stem her regal head,
Each undulating motion:—saying:—"See
How beautiful a thing it is to be!
O gracious moment that conceived it meet
That I should grow and just be fair and sweet!"

When from that haunted, grief-englamoured room
First ventured I into the great clean world,—
My world of arching skies and sweet new air—
'Twere hard to tell if most I joyed or grieved.
Thro' all the long, slow, convalescing days
Conspired the gracious ministrants of health—
The tempered air, the smiling April sun,
The happy birds, the little growing things
To lure the soul back to its cage again,
And Sœur Marie's low voice and gentle touch

Seemed but a chord the more in that full theme,
The jubilate of the waking spring.
And ah! the deep, sweet joy to feel again
That boundless heart—the mighty mother heart
That knows no change, still beating warm and true;
Within her tireless arms to lie at rest,
A child once more; to be again caressed
After long parting;—were that not joy?—and yet,
Do hearts 'neath mother-kisses straight forget
All tears and aches, or but the keener sense
By contrast with her touch the bleeding wounds
Fresh stabbed by hands less gentle?

Lethean-sweet
The peace and rest of those long dreamful days
To my worn spirit. One by one the keys
That grief had worn to wearying dissonance,
Regained their rightful tones. My lyric soul
Awoke to feel once more its myriad strings
A nearing subtle, full, symphonious touch
With nature's music. But as daily grew
The harmony more perfect, so increased
The one o'er-strainèd chord's discrepant sound,
Grown thrice discordant where would else abound
Fine consonance and peace inviolate.

What taught the heart that beat so evenly
Beneath that soft gray garb, to feel the hurt

Deep hidden in another, or to trace
With such un-erring swiftness to the cause,
I could not then divine; so when my nurse
Let fall one day the volume from her hands
And clasping mine, at once began to speak
As she had read more clearly in my look
My inmost soul than from the printed book
The author's thought, in my first great surprise
I turned in half resentment from her eyes.
But not like others was my Sœur Marie,
And stooping o'er me as an angel might
She gently whispered, "Child, I know your pain;
May I not know the hidden cause as well?
Forgive, if too abruptly thus aside
I thrust the veil so closely drawn to hide
Your aching wound; 'tis but that I may find
Some means of swifter healing, that so keen
I make the hurt.—Look in my eyes, dear soul,
And read if aught has moved me thus to speak
All uninvited, save the tender throb
Of woman's love to woman.—Do not fear
To let poor nature have her way; outpour
As freely all your pent-up pain as though
Your heart alone were listener. Dear one, know
The power to read your suffering thus doth prove
My right divine to share it,—right of love."

What magic lingered in her simple words
I cannot say; but this I know, they wrought
A mighty change within: up-rose the flood
Of stormy feeling:—barriers builded strong
Of stern reserve on piers of granite pride
Were swept away. Upon that gentle breast
I bowed my head and let the hot tears flow.
By tender words and tactful questioning
She won my halting, still-reluctant tongue
To freer speech until at last was told
The bitter story of my loss and wrong.
Thrice bitter from such wretched commonness
As bars its right of repetition here.

A battle lost;—an upright nature lured
From honor and from love;—a ruined home;—
A broken heart;—a wife's unswerving faith
Dragged in the dust. Such scorious elements
Have based most oft that unheroic tale,
A woman's story, since the world begun.
Who knows not all the sequel ere is done
The dull prelude? Yet nothing common-place
In its recital found my Sœur Marie.
My watchful pride, alert to guard my hurt
From prying, or from merely pitying eyes,
Detected naught in her fair, speaking face
But sweet compassion—that fine sympathy

A lofty soul feels for another soul
Held of itself a part.
Her clasping hands
In silent eloquence, attested oft
How well she guessed what shafts but slightly pierced:
Which deepest sunk, and which had left behind
The subtlest poison. While she listened so
It almost seemed her own had been the hurt
Instead of mine.
I can recall no word
She spoke in comfort or in counsel then;
But when the days in passing so had made
Familiar this new sharing of my grief
That I no longer shrank from open speech,
She turned one day, and in that low-keyed voice
That made her converse seem no less a part
Of nature's music than the tender sighs
Soft breathed above us thro' the wind-kissed pines,
She questioned thus:—"If it be not too great
Presumption on the part of one who comes
With but a recent claim upon your trust,
May I old friendship's right so far usurp
To ask you somewhat of your future plans?"

A moment I was dumb, so strange to me
Her question seemed, and then I made reply:
"I have no plans. 'Tis only those who hold

Some purpose dear who motive find for plans.
There are, I know, some natures so endowed
With self-igniting, deathless elements,
That disappointment only seems to serve
As fuel to their hope. Not so with mine:
I staked my all and lost. Henceforth for me
To live, is to endure as best I may
The common lot, but not to hope or plan."

A silence fell; in dreary retrospect
I gazed adown the changeful, stormy years
That summed my past:—a charred and blackened waste
Where straight young growths with leaf and bloom had been
Flame-swept with still their promise undefined.

O bitter moment in a woman's life
That brings the awful willingness to blot
From memory all the sacred name of "wife"
Evokes of joy, if so may be forgot
The deathless grief! That moment came to me
In that brief silence;—was its passion writ
Upon my face? Perchance, for Sœur Marie
Next spoke as she indeed had fathomed it.
"Dear, in your nature lie, thick-sown, the germs
Of strength and energy; no accident

That may retard the growth, can sap the life
Stored up within them. You are one of those
Who, thro' a long ancestral line have come
To rich inheritance of heart and brain:
One rare possession,—yours by truest right
Of self-accretion,—that fine, flexile will
That lends itself a ready instrument
To mighty purposes, renders you more free
Than many be to choose and shape your life.
To sit in passive, dumb endurance thro'
The years that stretch from now to listless age,
Were wanton waste thro' wilful negligence
Of riches,—not capriciously bestowed
By partial Providence,—but garnered up
Atom by atom, painfully and slow,
Thro' countless lives by countless millions lived.

You think my words too earnest,—all too grave
The import I ascribe to one small life?
O could you know the depth of reverence
And awe a pure and richly dowered soul
Can stir within me, rather would you be
Amazed that I in such poor, common speech
A theme so sacred dare so near approach!
In all the heights and depths of all the worlds
Of which imagination holds conceit,
Go find me aught whose worth and majesty

Dwarf not beside a single human soul.
What else so vast in possibilities;
So broad to grasp creation's mighty plan;
So keen to search its subtlest secrets out;
So deep to sound the purposes that be
Forever and forever fathomless?
And what in boundless aspiration soars
So high to touch the God-hood it adores?
Say not that any words these lips can frame
Too earnest be! Would that the gift were mine
To thrill you with such fervid eloquence
You could not choose but let your thought expand
Beneath its glow, till lifting it should soar
Above these clouds so heavy with your tears,
And in the bright air pulsing with the warmth
Of God's own love should meet the holy truth
That waits the recognition of your soul."

She ceased, and in her pure, up-lifted face
I gazed in wonder, so transfigured seemed
Its outlines. Thro' the wide, calm, steadfast eyes
All luminous with feeling, softly streamed
The white effulgence from the altar flame
That lit the inner temple of her soul.
Was it this light, or her impassioned words,
Or might of both that so resistless moved
Upon the night and chaos of my world?

A heart too often cheated of its hope
Is prone to guard full jealously the door
Where promise enters. If my Sœur Marie
Had sought, by wisest words to conjure forth
The ghosts of such ambitions and desires
As wrought me such disaster in their death,
She must have failed; but something in her speech
Struck deeper than the burnt-out strata where
The tender germs of hope had blighted been.
Some deep, long-buried world of consciousness
Seemed touched and quickened till in dim array
Came thronging forth the pictures it had stored
Of purer aspirations, fairer hopes
Than life as I had known it, fostered faith
To realize and mold to living forms.

I could not voice at once the surging thoughts
That swept my being as a tidal wave
Rising from memory's sea; but when the ebb
That follows fast upon the mightiest flow
Had left me free to scan the fresh-laved shore,
I found strange creatures,—bits of weed, and shells
That sang a sad sea-music to my ear:—
The songs of half-remembered long-agos.
Wild longings woke, and restless questionings
Pressed upward to my lips, where doubtful words
Some hint of their significance conveyed

To Sœur Marie. She gave them clearer form
And force more definite in speech somewhat like this:—

"Is it so new, this thought that every soul,
However meanly dowered, or richly graced,
Is but the growth of ages:—that we come
Into the world or well or ill equipped
According to our merit, and the stage
Of progress that as conscious beings we
Have reached in common with the growing race?
I know how strange at first this doctrine falls
On ears accustomed to those rock-walled creeds
Whose thund'rous booms alarm the fleets of reason.

From childhood we unthinkingly accept
The common teaching that each new-born soul
Comes as a fresh creation from God's hand;
Nor dare to question why the handiwork
Is laid aside in so unfinished form,
Or why such crude conceptions shadow forth
To travesty divine imagination.
Between perverted reverence that fears,
And indolence that shirks the fullest use
Of human rights, we crush the insistent "Why"
That seeks to force an entrance for the light
Of brave research that would solution find
For many a painful riddle in our life.

We speak of God as Justice, Truth and Love,
Nor heed the bitter facts of every-day
That rise in stern dispute. We see around
Us want and woe and jealousy and strife
And hate and fear and hardened selfishness,—
Off-sprung from inequalities that we
Affect a resignation to accept
As part and purpose of an all-wise plan.
Yet who that truly thinks, or fearless looks
At life in all its aspects, can discern
Thro' light of human love and justice, aught
To draw his worship toward a Being who
Has so created and so fixed by law
Each soul and its conditions that to strive
Were worse than vain? 'Twould better far accord
With what our inmost hearts can recognize
Of love and justice, to believe that He
Who gives us being, gives us equal chance
To climb by divers upward-leading ways—
That each may choose according to his will—
To that attainment and that perfect rest
The spirit longs for. As each human soul
From every other differs, so no two
The self-same path shall choose: neither shall seek
The self-same goal. Yet each alike shall find
Complete fulfilment of his true desire,—
See God indeed, and know that He is good!"

Her words that found their joyous echo in
My heart of hearts, awoke besides such doubts
As had their root in long-familiar creeds;—
Not all unquestioned neither yet denied.
So thus I asked:—"How can you reconcile
This faith in God's impartial love that gives
An equal chance to all, with that so far
From equal distribution of good gifts
We see on every side? How comes it that
These inequalities and wrongs exist
To work such woe?"

She smiled, then gently answered:
"Let us turn a page in nature's book, for there,
Unspoiled by poor translation, we may read
God's freshly written text. One summer day
I climbed a richly wooded peak that rose
In fair New England's range; the forest stood
In all its native grandeur of wild growth
Untouched by woodsman's craft; and high and wide,
So leaf-form, tint and texture all were lost
In deep, o'er-shadowing gloom, the towering crowns
Were proudly reared. Yet marked I how the trunks
Of Beeches, Poplars, Maples, even Oaks,
For generations striving toward the sky,
Had gained far less in girth than two decades
Of growth in sunny freedom should achieve.
I marvelled with a sense of keenest pain

To see these scions of a kingly race
So puny and so starved; but wandering on
I noted here and there a giant stem
Wrapped in its swarthy, tattered cloak of tan,—
The very type of rough and savage king.
At first I failed to guess the monarch's name
So loftily he bore his shaggy head
Amid the sombre shade; but when anon
An unkempt lock, down drooping from the rest,
Betrayed him of the Hemlock's gypsy race,
I smiled and no more wondered at the small-
Girthed oaks and puny maples. Here the wild,
Free Ishmael of the wood had nurture found
Best suited to his needs, and growing strong
And lusty in his youth, had far outstripped
And over-topped the young patricians who
In weakliness had quailed beneath his frown.

This picture I have oft recalled and oft
Have wondered by what chance or what design
Of Nature's fickle will, this upstart king
Had gained his despot sway. The sources whence
He drew his sustenance, I recognized
To be less deep than those the gentler race
Stretched finer souls to feed from. Him, I knew
Heredity's great law would yet compel
To yield his might-won throne, and then methought,

Perchance when come the true and rightful heirs
Into their own, that haply they shall find
New source of strength and richer elements
Of life because of this usurper's reign.

The fancy pleased me and I loved to think
'Twas all in line of purpose subtly planned
By that wise planner, Nature, whose fixed law
Gives justice to her children. Low and high,
Strong, weak, bad, good, the perfect and the crude,—
Each has its turn: each sees its one glad day
Of triumph and of conquest: knows for once
The fulness of its power, then dies content.
Nor is this all:—beneath the outward show
Of love impartial, lies a deeper law
Of higher justice based on larger love:
For when to satisfy the righteous claim
Upon her motherhood, wise nature gives
To those short-lived, crude, coarse, and selfish things
She brings to being, all their greed will take,
'Tis not to rob her dearer children, whom
She destines for a broader, richer life
And higher purpose. That were never love,
And nature is most loving and most wise:
For while the claim of each she satisfies,
She also sees that each in living out
To full fruition all its selfish greed

Demands of being, so shall minister
All unawares, to other lives, and yield
At last in full content its store of will—
Intensified and focused by self-love—
To energize and aid some higher life.

In great creation's fine economy
Naught serves itself alone. The seeming foul
Gives fuller life and beauty to the fair:
Evil is good disguised: good knows no ultimate:
To-day's perfection hints to-morrow's dream
Of loftier ideals. But my theme I fear
Has lured me further than I meant to stray
Into that realm—to me most dear and real—
Where bright imagination sits supreme,
Fair queen and regal mistress of the mind.

I know you see my fancy's trend and draw
From my most free translation vastly more
Than lends itself to fixèd forms of speech.
Nor need I point for you the analogue:—
As nature with her own, so even He,
The loving power she mirrors, deals with His.
And nothing He has fashioned can be lost,
Forgotten, or neglected: neither let
To taste that bitter, heart-corroding draught
We term injustice.

When the time shall come
For the last trial at those composite sums
We call our lives, and we are smiling shown
The method of their working, and the way
We missed the rule and strangely overlooked
Some plain, prime factors: when for us is found
The final answer, and with other sums
Our own we shall compare, to find that none
Than ours was easier of solution: none more full,
Complete and perfect in its last result;
Then shall we know that that soul-chilling thing
We named "injustice" nowhere findeth place
In the true plan. Born of our mortal loves,
Ignorance and passions, it holds no elements
Long to survive death of the mortal in us."

A curious consciousness of some unseen
Subjective self, responding ardently
To all the outlined and suggested truths
Her words conveyed, possessed me, tho' my mind
Quite failed to clearly grasp their larger import.
No comment seemed at once appropriate,
And with the hope indelibly to fix
On memory's scroll the graphic imagery
Of her unstudied speech, I silent sat,
Till lengthening shadows warned my gentle nurse
That my too brief, blue-vaulted day was ended.

. . . . . .

Ere April's pledges fairly were redeemed
In foliate May, my fast returning strength
Permitted me to seek the scented wood
Whose dim cathedral vistas from afar
Had long allured. Here stood the patriarch pines,
Those wise high-priests of Nature, set to guard
Her old alchemic rites, and tirelessly
To chant her changeless hymns of incantation.
Beneath their outstretched, peace-invoking hands
For hours together, Sœur Marie and I
Roamed in our ever-fascinating quest
Of coyly-hiding, thickly-clustering vines
All blossom-gemmed, Spring's sweetest harbinger,
And then in some moss-cushioned, sunny nook
We'd sit for quiet converse, while we culled
Our fragrant treasure over.
Thus apart
From all the pettiness of indoor life
And narrowing conventions, I could come
Somewhat in touch with that large restfulness
That so enhanced the ever-varying charm
And strong attractiveness that Sœur Marie's
Whole presence breathed. This restfulness I grew,
By my slow processes to recognize
As largely due to her rare, subtle, keen,
Profoundly mystic sympathy with nature.
And yet I know there was a something else—

A something not so readily explained
In her assured serenity and poise.
And powerfully this subtle something drew
And held my interest, so intangible
And all-elusive was it to my mind's
Most keen pursuit; nor would it let me rest
For fast-increasing wish to analyze
And clear-define it.

More and more each day
Her conversation evidenced a broad,
Unique experience of what I named—
For lack of other term—"religious life";
And yet so altogether genuine was she,
So obviously original her every phrase
And turn of speech, even her mode of thought
And line of argument, that much was I perplexed
To reconcile her fresh, sweet sentiments
And wholesome ethics, with my preconceit—
Not flattering—as touching on the views
And canting habit of religious zealots.
I tried to think my ignorance of the ways
And faiths of all recluses so had lent
This halo of vague mystery I felt
Surrounding Sœur Marie: and so dismissed
The oft-recurring puzzle; nor perceived
What time it fast was ripening to solution.

My undisguisèd pleasure in her speech,
What-e'er the time or subject, naturally
Induced from her a happy unrestraint
And frankness of expression, thro' which I
Was free to scan at will her inner life,
While consciousness of spiritual poverty
On my own part, before her opulence
Most often kept me silent.

But one day
Her more than common warmth and unreserve
So startled me,—discovering as it did
Apparent firm persuasion on her part
Of my complete response and sympathy,—
That I began to feel this silentness
Had been unpardonable. A tingling sense
Of inward shame at my unworthiness,
And deep chagrin that she should so mistake
My sentiments, wrought upon me. Sœur Marie
Might even think that she had found a firm
True proselyte, or—barring this,—at least
A faithful sympathizer, predisposed
To favor her peculiar creed or order.

A strong revolt from this so likely chance
Of flagrant misconception, plus the sense
Of all the depths and distances that yawned
Impassable between us, quickened me

To hasty protest, and inadvertently
Compelled the breach of that cold reticence
That held me mute whenever spiritual
And personal themes approached consociation.
An opportune remark from her, at length
Gave me the wished for opening, and then
I stood not on the order of my speech:—
"But Sœur Marie, the wisdom of your words—
Tho' plainly I perceive for such as you,
Yet are they not entirely wise for me.
By widely different worlds we have been shaped,—
Our natures tuned to wholly different keys.
Had I in early life been taught as you,—
Had I absorbed the creed of selflessness
And sweet humility: been set apart
For special service: learned the blessedness
Of pure—unselfish striving for the good:—
In short had education placed a goal
For me like that which upward lures your soul,
And all such souls as consecrate themselves
Like you in early youth, it might not be
Impossible that there is that within
My inmost nature that should make of me
A woman who like you could live the life
And joy in living.
But think how different
Have been my aims, my hopes and purposes.

To bring the fragments of a nature wrecked
Upon the stormy sea of worldliness,
And lay upon that holy altar where
Naught but the first and best should offered be,
Were veriest sacrilege. Ah! Sœur Marie,
I feel the fulness of your sympathy
And bless you for it. Still I can but know
That there are chapters in my shipwrecked life
You can but guess at. Shielded by your name
And order, you perforce have haply missed
Experience which alone can fully teach
How hearts can feel and how completely break.
You think that I can find new ideals, hopes,
To build myself around.—Ah! had you known
In all your gentle life a love and loss
Like mine, sweet friend, no need were now to frame
In words to you the bitter hopeless truth—
My soul has lost the power to strive again."

In simple honesty I longed to prove
What soon or late my friend was doomed to find,
That all her loving efforts had been vain.
And in the earnestness of my desire
To make myself and my position clear,
I grew oblivious of Sœur Marie
And shaped my words to fit the saintly nun.

Her utter stillness and her unresponse
To my long speech recalled me to myself,
When deep contrition seized me; for the face,
Always so calm and pure, was shadowed o'er
With such a look as moved me swift to say:—
"Have I so hurt you? Pardon, Sœur Marie!"

She took my proffered hands and mutely bent
Her face above them, while I remorseful sat
Waiting for her to speak.
"Dear heart," at last she said,
"No need is there to crave or grant excuse.
'Twas not your words that hurt, but memories
Long buried, that have thrilled to life again
And quivering agony.
I see that you,
Mis-led by my vocation, garb and name,
Have read me and my motives all amiss.
You asked me nothing of my past, and I
Presumed that you had rightly guessed or heard
Some knowledge of my order. This gray garb
Marks me not one of that great sisterhood
Who count themselves most blest and nearest Christ
When closest shut from Christ's great suffering world.
With no religious order, faith, or creed
Am I identified: nor am I bound

By any code that righteous men have fixed
As needful hedge for most of mortal kind.

In life's great school of human joy and pain
Long years ago I took my full degree.
I learned that good and evil, right and wrong,
Joy, sorrow, peace and pain, are only names
For such so infinitely varied states
As each may only enter for himself
And for himself define. In me was fought
That battle where the spirit meets its last,
Worst enemy,—the Self,—and conquering
Or conquered, evermore must justly know
Its weakness or its strength. The victory
So hardly won and at such frightful cost
That long the doubt remained if victory
It really were,—or only truce perforce,—
Left my spent spirit sorrowing in the dust,
All shorn of victor's pride.
Ah! no one—none
"Hath knowledge how much blood it costs!" and I
Was mercifully dazed, nor fully woke
To the keen sense of all my fearful loss
In that fierce struggle, till within my soul
Had dawned full knowledge of my priceless gain.

I went into the contest fettered, bound:—
The brand of many a coward master on me.

Tradition, fear, love of the world's dear praise,
Distrust of my own powers and doubt of God's,
All lashed my soul and mocked its claims to freedom.
And cruelest of all that crippled me,—
Dragging so at my heart strings,—was the strong,
Deep-rooted love for the dear foe I challenged.

Not mine, ah no! not mine,—such victory
As there was gained! For when my weak heart faltered,
And must straightway have yielded, lo! an arm
That never fails the valiant who succumbs
Not till he must, was stretched in my defence.
When next we met,—my king of foes and all
That horde that once through him had fettered me,
I fearless faced them, knowing I was free.—
And now unshackled by the iron law
Of the world's right, I take the one straight way
My feet must follow,—be it rough or smooth
Or lead where-e'er it may,—so I but see
The light ahead that leads my spirit on
To larger life and wisdom.

They who hold
Such freedom dangerous, and strive to map
Such various roads as *all* may safely walk
Nor go amiss, are right and wise:—'tis true

That many—mayhap all—at some time need
Such guidance and restriction as the learned
In moral lore can offer and enforce.
But here and there among the multitude
Some soul, full sharply tried because full strong
To stand the test, is by such trial freed
From bondage to the common law. To such,
The codes that one time proved such needful props,
Become grave obstacles to further growth:
How then to pass these hurtful bounds and yet
Hold fixed and true to each unwritten law
They sharp define, is that grave question which
Such souls must face and solve if they would climb
The eternal heights of peace.

Dear, strong, brave woman,—loving, constant, true,—
Unwittingly *your* soul has borne the test
Of pain's baptismal fires. You think the flames
That scorched so deep have blasted root and germ
Past hope of resurrection. 'Tis not so.
The happy garden of your girlish dreams,
So full of promise and fresh budding hopes,
Is swept away, I grant, and nevermore
On earth shall grow its like for you again.
But tell me, dear,—nor think I ask to pain,—
Nor yet to judge as if I had discerned

Some fault of nature in you,—'tis as if
My very self I questioned,—tell me then
If in that garden there had nothing grown
Beyond your strength to weed: that you now feel
Were well destroyed. Could you this moment pray
To have the whole restored? Free now to choose,
Would you have back unchanged in anything
Your vanished world? Your eyes have answered me.
That darkening shade of pain and lurking fear
Tells all I need to know.
And yet for me
Who hold my past,—e'en all my saddest past—
A faithful counsellor, trusty guide and friend
To lead me thro' such shadow-misted ways
As mark my untried future, it would seem
Strange mockery indeed to bid *you* turn
From your dead world and hasten to forget.
Forgotten merely, pain's residium
Will linger and corrode beneath the scar
That marks the outward healing; but if held
In safe solution by humility
And wise submission, Time's sure alchemy
Will so transmute pain's crudest elements
That only in their purest ultimate,
Beneficient and healing, shall they rise
To mingle with the spirit."

The subtle, sweet,
Compelling dominant, that ever set
Some new chord vibrant in me, thrilling it
To yearning, vague, elusive, wavering touch
With something dear and distant, like the dim,
Far, half-remembered music of a dream,
Was in her accents. And from somewhere 'neath
The glacier-hardened crust where stonily
Had lain my heart, there leapt a sudden flame.

Whence came this rare white soul of womanhood
I knew as Sœur Marie? Whence all her wisdom?
By what privilege, vouchsafed to her beyond
The common right of mortals, had she gained
This certainty of knowledge, this calm peace,
This strength, this poise, this saint's courageousness.
That all my soul with sudden passion envied?

The questions that I framed gave little hint
Of the fierce, strong, imperious demand
For fuller knowledge of her that this slight
Revealment of herself had roused within me.
" How is it then," I queried, " that you wear
This nun's attire, and sacrifice your life
To gentle service, seeking no return
For all you give in lavish tenderness
Of your heart's best, thro' these dear angel hands?—
Sweet Sister of Compassion that you are!

With gifts like yours, the unattainable
Of this world's goals could scarce exist, and yet
You seem indifferent, or wholly free
From worldly aims. Why are your hopes and dreams
So lifted and remote from all that stirs
The common heart and wakes it to ambition?
Since you disclaim the cloister I confess
Myself perplexed indeed, concerning you.
Some spiritual order sometime, surely, must
Have nurtured you, else how come you to be
Your dear peculiar self,—and how called Sœur
Marie?"

"A faith and order spiritual indeed,
Though not religious,—in the straightened sense
Ecclesiastical,—I do acknowledge.
'Tis true they call me 'Sœur,' and many led
By that, my mission, and this gray attire
To hasty inference, conclude that 'nun'
Is my appropriate title. Ne'er-the-less
The word's a sobriquet and hardly fitting.

You must have marked how different is my garb
From that made so familiar to your eyes
By pale recluses, or those gentle Sœurs
De Merci, who like shadowy spirits strayed

From some dead planet, take their silent way
Among us, yet not of us.
Be it far
From my sincere intention to suggest
Comparisons invidious; the pure
Devoted, patient lives and countless deeds
Of sacrifice and noiseless charity
That stand accounted, to that faithful band
Commands from me respect and reverence
Most genuine and deep. And, lest fuller light
Upon their faith and principles might shame
A present judgment, let me not presume
To criticise what certainly would seem
But slavish bending to a priestly rule
And superstitious custom in their rites,
And curious grave-like vestments.
Be all that
However as it may, it not concerns
My present subject save as it may serve
To emphasize some points of difference
Between them and my order. Not for us
The pale disfiguring band that straightly hides
The noblest feature of the human face;—
That feature where, if anywhere, God stamps
The impress of His thought.—Neither the close-
Wound curve-concealing wimple, nor the veil
Do we affect, but leave each happiest grace

Of form and feature beautiful and free
As nature modelled it. No sympathy
Have we with those harsh creeds whose tenets teach
The beauty of holiness but quite forget
The holiness of beauty. We believe
Omniscience was Omniscient still, e'en when
It fashioned woman; so in reverence hold
His every gift a dear and sacred trust,
And seek in love and gratitude to know
How we may best employ it to perfect
His purpose in us.
Since gracious lines and curves
And tender tints, that rest and satisfy
The heart's dumb ache for beauty, are no less
His holy handiwork when they enshrine
A human soul, than when they're chaliced round
The lily's censer, we esteem it part
Of perfect service to keep beautiful
And pure, his temple wherein for the day
We call a life, at least, we're doomed to worship.—
Nay—not doomed,—permitted rather, for 'tis fair
And good to dwell in,—full of music too,—
Save we ourselves wake discord in its echoes.

We must be clothed, and reasons practical
And very far removed from sentiment
Or thoughts fanatic, constrained us to adopt

Some quite distinctive dress. First it protects;
Next simplifies our needs, and sets us free
From fashion's thrall; and last, but far from least
Of such advantages as daily use
Confirms for this soft gray, we find it rests
The jaded nerves whose need necessitates
Employ of many an art to soothe and strengthen."
"And forcibly indeed can *I* attest
The excellence in practice of that last
Consideration. But greatly do I grudge
This interruption and sincerely hope
You will continue. Somehow you have roused
An interest in my mind more eager and intense
Than words can evidence. But I do not mean
To question deeper than my slender claim
To special favor warrants; and the least
Your inclination moves you to disclose
Shall quite suffice. Still if the privilege
Extended me permits it, I would like
To venture this one question:—What consists
Or constitutes the body corporate
Of this alluring dream of sisterhood
That scarcely yet seems more than dream to me?
Is it an order fixed and limited
By local habitation and a name?
Strange as it seems no doubt, I'm not aware
I ever heard till now of its existence.

Still I confess that scarce another mind
Of passable attainments, harbors less
Of accurate information which relates
To recluse lives and orders, than my own.

When first I saw you, in the indolence
Of mental weariness I scarcely thought
Of *you* at all; but rested in the warmth
Your presence shed much as the leafless stem
Rests in the subtile aura of the spring.
Some vague association lingering
Behind descriptions I had sometime read—
But quite forgotten—of the good gray nuns,
Sufficed to set at rest such flickerings
Of curious interest concerning where
To place you, as I doubt not must have crossed
My languid mind; and your identity
Once settled for me, nothing subsequent
Chanced to disturb it."

"And far indeed from an *un*compliment
Was your mistaken inference," she rejoined
With the rare smile lighting her countenance,
"For all the virtues of that sisterhood
I do revere and humbly emulate.
I doubt me tho' if those same blessèd saints
Were equally self-gratulate to know

That such a hopeless heretic had passed
As hailing from their cloister. Still perhaps,
On second thought, their very life would lead
To juster comprehension of the faith
And motive of our order than we win
From many a liberal (?) worldling.

But let me not neglect your pertinent
And no-wise ill-timed question:—which in view
Of the pure sentiments that prompted it
I'm more than pleased to answer, and no fear
That any others you may wish to ask
Can be inapt or anything but welcome.

A habitation and a name as well
We do possess; but still are over young
As an established order to have earned
Such marked distinction as would make us known
Save to a kindred few. And since we find
Seclusion most essential to sure growth
We leave for those who value it such fame
As readily accrues to whoso seeketh.

The title that we bear commemorates
That royal woman and ill-fated queen
Whose wrongs bear shameful witness to the codes
That stood for manliness in ancient Persia.

Hail, noble queen! Queen always, tho' discrowned
And broken-hearted. Honor to thy name
Who bravely bore the censure of thy lord,
And such humiliation as those cold,
Despotic, scheming diplomats devised
To heap upon thee, rather than concede
Obedience where discourteous command
Proved kingly grace and manly reverence lacking!
Peerless thou art forever in thy lone
And lofty courage. First who dared obey
Thine own unerring instincts, and thy pure
All-womanly perception of the right,
Tho' weighed against thy kingdom. Thou didst win
A mightier than those despots took from thee,
And hast bequeathed it to thy royal daughters!
Grief is their portion: suffering and loss
Too oft befall them: yet no precious pearl
Of their inheritance shall ever go
To purchase ease, nor regal circumstance,—
Nor even thrones,—still are they always royal.

You have divined our title, and I now
Will tell you where but little while ago
We fixed our dwelling-place,—our "Vashti's Home."
Ay, verily a home! For there we rest
And work and grow by giving our heart's best
Each unto all in ready helpfulness.

For so in little deeds and thoughts of love,
In generous comprehension,—in the full
Ungrudging recognition of the needs
And claims of others,—does the spirit find
Its sweetest source of nurture for the life
That lifts and broadens into symmetry
And perfect grace and fragrant blossoming.

Ah! how I wish that I might picture you
That sunny home!—the home of purity
And peace and happiness that every good,
Sweet, loving woman longs for!
Do you know
That dear, enchanted lake that bears the name
Of old world music; resting like a babe
In fairy cradle, shyly smiling back
In blue-eyed wonder into smiling skies
That bend so low above it where it lies
Close-guarded by the soft Wisconsin hills?
Ah! you do know it! then no need to say
The spot for our "Heimgarten" scarce could be
More fitly chosen.
The interest that I see
Depicted in your face must later plead
My strong excuse for offering what may seem
A somewhat egotistical account
Of how this home of ours came into being.

The focal germ round which have since accrued
Such kindred germs as faith and energy
Have fostered into most surprising growth,
Received its first real ray of quickening life
From the rare friend whose well-tried sympathy
Rings always true, and whose wise-heartedness,
In many of my life's emergencies,
Has proved so safe a guide and sure dependence.

Look not such wide surprise. However strong
A woman's spirit may be, still her heart
Must find some genial, firm-based human rock
Less plastic than itself to rest upon,
If her fine soul is not to free itself
For kindlier spheres ere yet it has attained
Full growth and ripeness in the earth garden.
'Tis fineness and not weakness, that unfits
The fibre feminine for steady, long,
Persistent and successful buffeting
With the fierce winds of adverse circumstance
In cold unsheltered places. And if God
Had not seen fit to fashion in these times,
One man of royal instincts,—nobly true
And chivalrous of heart to comprehend
The best in womanhood;—and given him
A steady brain and strong and helpful hand,
And kept him pure to speak His message thro',—

I would not now, my friend, be here with you
To bear glad witness to the miracle.

One day—the only one my memory marks
From a long file of days that wretchedness
Had flattened to a dead monotony,—
He came, as was his custom at that hour,
And looking with that searching glance of his
Into my eyes and holding my weak hand,
He said, with emphasis that served to fix
My languid interest—too inclined to roam
From the dull theme of oft-recounted symptoms,—
'My friend, you're dying of a slow disease
That only women die of. A crisis grave—
Perhaps fatal even—is nearing fast;
But while I warn you, I must also say
That we have left untried one hopeful means
By which this dread disease may yet be baffled.'

He took swift note of my unspoken question,
And then made haste to parry it unanswered.
'No, never mind the name. A name, you know,
Is like a wingèd seed that sows itself,
To grow in time a hundred other seeds
Till soon we have a harvest—sometimes good,—
More often evil, for ill things you know
Are somehow more prolific than the good,—

If haply shorter-lived. We'll talk of how
To fight this ill of yours by strategy;
Then you shall name it in an epitaph
Some day when you are happy.'

'Talk not to me,' I cried, 'of *happiness!*
You do not know how cruelly that word
May sometimes torture!' And then that he had meant
Should happen, happened; for the poor, pent heart
So sorely over-charged with the full weight
Of tears that would not flow, had found relief.

He did not try to stay that hurrying flood
Of hot but healing tears, but let me weep
Till nature could no more. Then presently,—
With that peculiar gentleness that marks
His simplest word or gesture,—clasped the hand
That still was trembling from the storm, and said:—
'These tears will save you: if not quite the cure
I had in mind, still maybe 'tis as well
That nature should forestall me. Now I mean
To forestall nature.' Then his smile grew grave:—
'Can you not give that tired heart of yours
Relief another way, and tell me what
Is slowly breaking it?'

E'en to this day
I know not how it came that all that load

Of hard, humiliant sorrow I had meant
To keep forever sealed within my lips,
Had slip't its bounds and passed them. But I know
That more than half its dull distracting weight
Went with my friend when easier duties came
To call him from my side that summer day.

You know the skill that many a stricken mind,
Restored and whole, has cause to bless him for;
And I'll not weary you with long account
Of how he turned my thoughts by slow degrees
Away from hurtful grooves, and tactfully
Set all the misery-choked, discouraged springs
Of sympathy again to healthful flowing.

One day his theme would be some dread disease
That highest human skill seemed powerless
To more than palliate;—the next perhaps
He'd paint some scene of wretched suffering
That need not be if but the practical
And simple means to supplement his work
Were at command. Here mayhap I must share
Some bitter sorrow that the fresh-turned sod
Must shortly cover:—there, far sadder woe
Appealed, where ached a heart full poignantly
For that no grave would hide its peaceless dead.
He drew me thus, unwittingly to myself,

Up by his side, where, in the searching light
Of actual fact, these painful pictures lay
Unsoftened by such shadows as my own
Dark sorrow might at closer view have lent them.
And such his generous tact, *my* threatening reefs
Were safely rounded ere I grew aware
What priceless lessons in the blessed art
Of tender helpfulness and pitying love,
And sympathy, that leads to self-forgetting,
He in his wisdom had been teaching me.

Thro' simple gratitude I first was moved
To study how I best could complement
His altruistic labors: then it fell,
As if in natural order, that ere long
He scarcely thought to question if in straits
He might rely on me for help and counsel.
'Twas thus, one day when he had sought my aid
In solving what for him had so far proved
A baffling human problem,—while we still
Were vainly puzzling over it,—it chanced
That half in jest, the slender blade of thought
That afterward attained such magnitude
Sprang up between us.

He had grown distraught
And paced my study floor with nervous strides,
Unceasing back and forth, distractingly,

Until by my own nervousness compelled
To break his absent mood, I smiling said
'Why this dissatisfaction, might I ask?
Is it because the famed efficiency
Of woman's intuition put to test,
Has this time proved an ignominious failure?
I know this morning's work has poorly served
To raise your man's respect for what we claim
As our peculiar feminine distinction.
But hold your judgment, friend; give me the night
To weigh this problem—which you can but grant
Is very far from simple,—and by this
To-morrow, I can safely promise you
Your confidence restored in woman's wit.'

My banter served its purpose, for at last
He ceased his restless walk, regarding me
A moment, still abstracted, ere he spoke:—
'I plead not guilty to the ungallant
Reflections your most hastily deduced
Conclusions would impute,—'though I must own
The justice of your primal observation.
The woman's intuition cannot fail
Where once you have engaged the woman heart;
And I've no apprehensions on the score
Of how you mean to finally dispose
Of my hard problem. What has caused in me

The mood you rightly named " dissatisfaction,"
Nothing concerns your capability
Or will have to serve my needy protégés,
But touches on a far more vital question.
Your eyes are more than clear, your judgment sure,
Wherever other lives' necessities
Make dumb appeal: then wherefore should you be
So more than blind, or else indifferent,
To what your own starved nature mutely prays for?
I know what you would say;—you're making fair
And steady progress toward your normal health;
But that does not content me. What I want
For you is nurture, sunshine, air and space,
Such as your being urgently demands,
For growth and free expansion.—You need a home.'

' A home? ' I said, perplexed, for where we talked,
'Mid spacious walls and soft accessories
To ease and busy leisure, I was sure
He knew me rightful mistress.
' Yes, a home.
He quietly repeated. ' Give the word
Its fullest weight of Anglo-Saxon meaning.
A home is not what merely shelters us,
Or lends such prestige as the social world
Accords to what helps build it. Home is where
The heart is nourished, cultured, exercised

To the full measure and the use of all
Its latent powers and possibilities,
And strengthened for true service in the world.
So rich a womanhood as yours is starved,
Repressed and warped from its symmetrical
And full unfoldment, when it fails that close
And constant interchange of sympathy,—
That happy exercise of heart and brain
In tenderness and care for weaker things—
That constitutes the spirit of a home.
I *am* dissatisfied because for lack
Of right environment, one glorious type
Of strong, complete and rounded womanhood
That might be, is not.'

'Indeed, you greatly over-
estimate
My meagre store of possibilities!'
I answered calmly and with some reserve;
For this implied forgetting on his part
Of what so hard and bitter fate enforced
My present lonely life, had wounded me.
And then my calmness suddenly gave place
To warm, indignant protest:—

'Do you then,
In common with the most of men, believe
That that most arduous of human tasks:
That loftiest and holiest of all aims:

The founding on firm ground, the building sure:
The watching, warding, keeping undefiled,
Wholesome and holy, home and all the word
Originally stood for:—filling it
With life and light and music, made of joy
And peace and purity,—you think
Such work as this belongs alone to *woman?*
If the best that she by single effort,
Can achieve, when freed from clog or hindrance,
Seems to you so far from perfect, what of that
Most wretched semblance that so often stands
For home when haps it that the fateful hand,
In honor pledged to aid and further her
In all her noblest aims and purposes,
Proves wantonly destructive, or at best
A hopeless drag to all her energies?
A home should be, I grant you, all the best
That poet pen can picture or suggest.
But never on life's canvas shall we see
Such picture realized until in man
Is born the knowledge and the will to do
His honest, faithful part.—Is *born!* Ay, there
We have the key to man's regeneration!
She who weaves from her own subtile fibre,
Marvellously, in ways she wots not of,
The living calyx where a soul is caught
And safely cradled; she whose sacred trust

None but the whitest angels up in heaven
Dare of themselves assume,—the fashioning
Of tender things that ever-more must bear,
For beauty or for blemish, every least
And lightest impress of the modeler's hand,—
Whether it be the careful master-stroke
Or ignorant handling,—she it is who first
Must be set free, uplifted, purified;
Made strong with courage, wise and nobly fit
To wear her priceless crown of motherhood,
Before the world can look for better men.'

'All true,' assented he, 'but will you stop
Where thousands have, content to recognize
A vital truth, nor seek expedients
To make it practical? You who perceive
So far so clearly, can you not descry
Some means to compass what so ardently
Your reverent spirit prays to see accomplished?
Admit that man's regeneration waits
On woman's spiritual emancipation, still
The question of a better race of men
Remains in *status quo*. Man's moral plane
Is not so high as woman's, therefore how
Shall he help her to rise? The only means
To uplift woman-kind 'twould seem inheres
In womanhood itself; nor can I see

How man can help her,—save perhaps he lends
His strength as fulcrum to her moral lever.—
Indeed it rather seems to me that man
For ages past, has so contributed
His powers to further feminine ambitions.
How more could he advantage her? In fact,
What is it that seditious woman needs
Or waits for to effect her own redemption?'

His final query, partly quizzical
And partly earnest, piqued my woman's pride
To quick retort.
'The woman's need,' I said,
'Is man's need also, tho' her wants, I grant,
Are mainly different and something less
Irrational—e'en tho' savants do see fit
To sit in judgment on her strong demands
For 'higher education' and the right
To free employment of her faculties
Along self-chosen lines. I feel no call
To argue in behalf of 'Woman's Cause,'
And only speak for all humanity
When moved to plead for any information;—
For man and woman make two equal halves
To be redeemed as one or lost divided.—
But whether the human race shall gain or lose
Thro' special training and unfettered use

Of woman's intellect, I hold it to be
A question that should shame a thinking age
To speechful silence.
The one doubtful point
Which well may agitate the wisest heads
Of these enlightened times, is whether yet
The truest means to healthful discipline
And culture of the ' genius humanus '
Of either sex, has been exemplified
Or e'en discovered. Humanity, poor waif,
Scarce conscious what it misses, stands forlorn
At Wisdom's gate and waits with patient eyes
For its true Alma Mater to come by
And pity its neglected orphanage.'

Our friend here took occasion to defend
Our splendid halls of learning, pointing out
The excellence of their methods; and, alert
In all his masculine regard and jealousy
For settled institutions, bade me state
Where I could point improvement, ' ere I swept
Our educational systems thus aside
With all a woman's fine inconsequence.'
And thus full fairly challenged, what could I
But summon all my wits to prove him wrong
In thinking me a mere iconoclast?
But hardly less than he was I surprised

At what Utopian vision sprang to life
And vivid outline 'neath the actinic warmth
Of my impulsive words. Never before
Had my vague heresies resolved themselves
To well-defined objections; nor till now,
My cherished dreams of some far nobler plan
Of education than the world yet knew
Found solid ground for near anticipation.

At first with genial tolerance, tinged perhaps
With curiosity our friend gave ear
To my swift flow of speech; but presently
His look of half-amusement changed to keen,
Attentive interest, till, before I reached
The climax of my optimistic dreaming,
His interest grew and quickened into warm,
Enthusiastic sympathy that fired
My final utterance, and lent the thrill
And eerie fatefulness of prophecy.

'That great wave,' I concluded, 'preordained
To give the world its next grand impetus
Millenialward, needs all the conscious strength
The race can garner up and concentrate
To meet its swift incoming and to launch
In safety all our priceless hopes upon it.
Only such wisdom as the heart distils

From purity and love can generate
This needed strength; and how to re-create
The human heart and teach it to perform
Its holy office, seems to me the one
Divinely hallowèd task that worthily
Awaits some fervent soul's full consecration.'

His eyes shone mistily:—'Who knows,' he said,
'But you yourself are destined to fulfill
That Heaven-appointed mission?' Then he rose
And clasped my hand and left me gravely thoughtful.

When God maps any work for us, I'm sure
He also maps the means to its completion;
And ere I had admitted to my mind
As fairly feasible, our friend's suggestion,
He brought me plans so plainly practical
And well thought out, that I could nothing less
Than pledge him my sincere coöperation:—
Tho' gravely doubting still the fittingness
Of that unique responsibility
His confidence so readily assigned me.

An enterprise resolved upon, with some
Is half accomplished, and ere many months
Had passed, our thought had taken partial shape
In solid stone and marble. A lustrum now

Has watched the fair unfolding of that dream
That all my life had haunted; and the deep
Unselfish satisfaction so far reaped
Were worth another life's probationship
Sacrific even as Heaven required of me."

Strong as my interest was, the gentle hush
Upon her face constrained me to repress
My eager wish for more, till the sweet smile
Invited me to speak; then clamorously
A score of questions each claimed precedence.
She answering, thus resumed:—"I hardly know
What first suggested 'Vashti's' as the name
Most fitting for our Home; but once it found
Consideration with us, nothing else
Would seem admissible. Our aim in part
You see, was evolution of the best
And highest qualities of womanhood,
In such environment as would afford
Room for their free employment in some cause
Whose issue should requite love's labor vested.
And such a cause we knew our final aim
Indubitably furnished; for the hope
Of speeding, e'er so slightly, toward the goal
Of perfectness, one human entity,
Seemed work that even angels might rejoice
To have assigned them.

And right association we believed
The two essential principles involved
In youthful education: and a child
Could not, we argued, constantly respire
The pure and vital atmosphere we meant
Our home should insulate, except to store
That spiritual elixir which insures
To good inheritance development
Harmonious and full. The woman meant
By Heaven's most plain intention to create
And keep such atmosphere, is never found
Of natural choice, outside the sheltering arms
Of love and home. 'Tis such and only such—
As fate has stranded and left desolate,
Who rightly can esteem a home like ours,
Or bring to it its grand desiderata.
These are the Vashti's, sorrow-taught, but brave,
Who've walked uprightly their appointed ways
Thro' bitterness and trial, gaining thus
The tender heart, the sweet humility,
The patience and the dignity of soul,
That mark them worthy of their chastening.
We do not look for such as these where throng
Competitors for privilege to race
Beside the strong, hard-driven sons of Adam.
The genius-of-the-world's most tempting lure

To man's ambition, looks the veriest toy
To what the full-orbed woman cherisheth
Within her heart of hearts as worth achievement.

Bereft of home and all the dear delights
Of loving ministration; shorn of all
Her heart had offered worship to: deprived
Of such sweet, natural means of growth and grace
As motherhood, love-heralded, affords her,
Brave, large-souled, tender Vashti! What can she
But let her hungry heart and eager brain
Consume themselves, except for her to found
Some kingdom worthy of her royal sceptre?
Our home is such a kingdom; and the proud,
Sincere devotedness and reverence
Of her most loyal subjects, prove how wise
And just, and love-inspiring is her reign.
Her subjects? You should see them! Nobly-poised,
Sweet, gracious women, gentle girls, and rare,
Exotic types of small humanity
That left unhomed, are welcomed to our care.

No one can buy the right to dwell with us,
But those we know possessed in large degree

Of woman's finest gifts, and also freed
By circumstance from all the natural ties
That love and duty make so sweetly binding,—
Such we seek out and ask to hide with us;—
At first, a while as guest, the better thus
To judge if they can pledge the sisterhood
Full fealty and support. And this explains
How came our friend to ask of me,—instead
Of one more versed in strict pathology,—
To watch beside you while he strove to lead
You safely past the Valley of the Shadow."

My cheek flushed warm as suddenly I sensed
The gaping gulf between the buoyant health
That thrilled me now, and those numb, stricken days
That found me Sœur Marie. And all my heart
Throbbed in the grateful hands that silent reached
To clasp the two that in such love had served me.

She was the first to speak, and all the warm,
Soft tenderness of her sweet womanhood
Caressed me in her voice:

"Dear, will you come
While yet the witchery of June is round it,
And prove if too alluringly my love
Has sketched the picture of our happy Rest?
I own to something selfish in the wish

That you should learn to love us: for to win
Your final full allegiance could but bring
Great joy to me as well as gain to Vashti's.
But ev'n all this apart I greatly wish
For your own sake that you should breathe awhile
The subtile air of that small paradise.—
So sure am I that such environment
Will soon discover what vast areas lie
Still fallow in your nature,—ay, unguessed
By your blind self-distrust."
The tender smile,
So full of loving confidence, yet failed
To exorcise that watchful demon, doubt,
That ever kept his silent pace beside me.
"But surely," I protested, "you have seen
Ere this, how hopelessly my attributes
Fall short of your high standard.
Those eyes of yours, I know but seldom read
Amiss in what they estimate but now,
Believe me, your kind heart has glamoured them."

She shook her head and smiled convincingly,
But I went on: "If sorrow sought me out,
'Twas not my worthiness attracted it.
And if *per contra*, Providence saw fit
To send it as a means of discipline,
Most sadly it miscarried of its purpose.

In no way am I better. Such small store
Of faith and goodness as perhaps I might
Have once laid claim to, now is worse than nil.
Not only faith in any power that guides
Events with justice and intelligence
Is wholly shattered,—that I might endure
In Stoic fashion,—but capacity
To love my fellow-creatures:—hope, desire
Or will to aid them:—ev'n the selfish wish
To free my wretched self from wretchedness,
Seems paralyzed within me. You perceive
I am no Vashti,—one who 'passing thro'
The Valley of Bacca maketh it a well.'
Your sisterhood allures me with its sweet,
Enticing promise of secluded rest;
But while its motives much commend themselves
For beauty and for ethics, still I feel
No wish to lend them personal devotion.
With this keen consciousness of how remote
Is my real character from your conception—
How could I silently appropriate
Your flattering estimation; or accept
The hospitality your generous heart
So graciously extends to an ideal?
If, after this confession, you can still
Accord to me unchanged your trust and friendship,

Then gratefully indeed do I consent
To be your guest at Vashti's."
No least shade
Of doubt or disappointment crossed her brow
Or darkened in her eyes. And her reply
Disclosed how utterly my words had failed
To change or move her:—
"Sometimes it is given
To one whom love makes worthy of the trust,
To read the record of a kindred spirit,—
Its past and future, clearly as we read
The sky at evening. Do not we discern
From sunset colors, whispering winds, and vague
Swift signs, elusive to the slow-winged senses,
The kind of day that has been, and what kind
Must of a surety follow? Not all days
Thus openly record themselves, nor yet
May every soul be read unerringly
By most prophetic vision. Only when
The ties of love and loyalty have bound
For cycles long two kindred souls together,
Can either give the ancient countersign
With freedom not to fail of recognition.
We are not strangers, even tho' this world
Can date our meeting from but yesterday.
I know my friend, and much more truly than
She knows herself; and once more in the name

Of that dear knowledge, I entreat of you
To let her be my guest, and nothing state
Henceforth to me that may discredit her."

What could I say? Beneath the playfulness
Of her last chiding words, I would but feel
The deep sincerity to which my heart
Instinctively responded; tho' in vain
My reason groped for relevance in much
The mystic tenor of her speech imported.

. . . . . .

A sheet of living sapphire, greenly girt
By velvet hills, and densely broidered in
With rare and variegated silken richness:
Rough-quarried granite, and wrought marble, grouped
And arched and domed and columned till they sang
In symphony together, gleaming soft
Thro' gray and green and umber,—tracery wrought
By cunning forest-fingers taught of June
A naiad flashing by in haste to hide
Her shimmering whiteness in the shielding waters;
And over all the sky—the soft June sky,—
Flecked with the filmy forms of mist-born spirits.

"A dream," I thought, "a dream within a dream."
For all this witchery of loveliness

Lay softly mirrored in the sleeping lake.
White, classic-draped, slow-moving goddesses,
Gay groups of children, slender, sylph-like girls,
And cherub-featured infants, cooing soft
To dove-eyed mother-faces, gave the scene
Unfolded to my unpreparèd vision,
A touch of Arcady, and thrilled a low,
Long dormant chord of youthful visioning
Half happiness, half dimly memoried pain.
O fair sequestered nook! Dear Home!
Sweet Home!
The blessèd peace that broodeth over thee
Lulled all my soul to rest; and banishing
Its cumulous cloud of sorrows, set it free
To rise to that pure world whose living light
Thy silent teachings pointed. Sheltering Home!
When I forget the hallowèd mother-touch
That soothed my infant griefs: when from my heart
Time's hand obliterates that mother's smile:
Then shall grow dim the blessèd memory
Of days that saw thy soft, protecting wings
Infold my spirit while thy love transformed it!

. . . . . .

A fortnight I had said when Sœur Marie
First begged the stipulated week's extension;
But summer's prime was past and wingèd seers
Insistent shrilled of doom to drowsy August

Before my heart could bring itself to heed
Claims urgently demanding my departure.
And ah, those fair, enchanted, fleeting weeks
Purloined from puissant care! How shall I tell
What vast eternal gain their passing wrought
To me of life's imperishable riches?

The interested, free, unhurrying
Activity around; the restful air
Of large unfettered leisure to pursue
The all-delighted aim of happy living,
While failing not to work upon my heart
Its subtle soothing spell no less provoked
My critic mind to wonder. "How," I thought,
"Can high refinement and broad culture rest
Thus satisfied in what alone concerns
This small, detached and introverted world?
Is intellect so all-conformable
That once assimilating greatness, still
Its healthy vigor finds the minimum
Of puerile interests not the less sufficing?"

O conceit of knowledge uniformed
Of that pure wisdom that doth ever wear
The garb of foolishness to worldly vision!
In after days when clearer insight dawned
And understanding deepened, thoughts like these

Put all my soul to blush; for he who forms
With equal care the tiniest lichen-cup
Or farthest world of fast-revolving light,
No least thing nameth small, and nothing great.

An honored guest, yet unrestrained and free
As any habitué, I came and went,
Among the busy, happy household bees,
As fancy wafted me or interest led;
And from the calm-faced, clear-eyed Gretchen,—capped
And snowy aproned—to the slender girl
Whose every motion spoke her gentle breeding,
I marked no mood but glad contentedness
And eager drinking like a growing flower
Of life's pure light and sweetness.
No one there
Among those gracious women seemed to hold
Superior place nor yet assumed the air
Or accent of instructor; nor could I
Detect authority or servileness
In any tone or gesture. All appeared
As on an equal footing,—bound by laws
Of courtesy and kindness each to serve
The other, each unobtrusively alert
To give her best, and tactfully accord
Room to the least another's heart would proffer.

" Freedom," had answered Sœur Marie, when I
Confessed the key to this fine harmony
An undiscovered secret; " no one here
Claims of another e'en the slightest thing
As due by right. From our Home lexicon
Two jaded terms are watchfully excluded;—
' Duty ' and ' obligation,' and in their stead
We write the one word 'love.' "

"And do you find
Love all that's needed for the discipline
And government of childhood? " I inquired
With smiling skepticism.

"All " she said,
In that low, even tone that never failed
To carry full conviction; and my close
And curious after-observation proved
How justly founded was her affirmation.

Few were the hours of those soft summer days
That even Vashti's classic halls could lure us.
For dark indeed must be Olympus' frown
To drive such nature-worshippers as we
To flee the temple of their trusted goddess.
Each morning found us gathering 'neath the trees
In eager groups for long delightful talks
With Sœur Marie; for never day but brought

Some question baffling in its subtleties
To our less penetrant and lucid minds,
Yet ever simple to her pure heart-wisdom.
For even here, among these many rare
And nobly-dowered spirits, Sœur Marie
Still shone apart with luculent, serene,
Unborrowed lustre, like a lonely star.
And all adored the sweet humility
And gentle grace that lent such genialness
To her dear presence, for all recognized
The rarity of soul that less of love
Had left too fine and cold for friendship's uses.

No principle nor problem seemed to be
Too deep for her fine sympathy to fathom;
And watching her in this environment,
I more and more perceived how hitherto
I had but glimpsed her nature's varied richness.

With no less pleasure than the rest I drank
Her fresh extempore wisdom, marvelling
At its so fine adaption to the needs
Of various minds and moods. But best was I
Content when happened it that all the rest
Found interests elsewhere; then my Sœur Marie
And I would seek a small, steep-winding path,—
Unfrequented by others thro' the sweet

And courteous tact that marked the preference,
Tho' unexpressed, and held our favorite way
As sacred to that freer conference
Our quiet strolls permitted.—In and out
Thro' brush and forest-tangle, up and up
By rock and stream it wound, our little path,
To cease abruptly where a single pine
Had kept for decades long its lonely vigils.
Here, while a sweet, incessant, murmuring song
Timed to the beat of waves far down below us,
Charmed us to silent sympathy or moved
To unreservèd speech, I sometimes framed—
And she as simply answered—questions which
Self-consciousness might otherwhere have hindered.

The life at Vashti's more and more appealed
To that mercurial imagination
Which was my large but doubtful heritage;
And judgment, always sternly vigilant
To guard against a final full surrender,
Oft prompted me to cynic-utterance
Or adverse criticism;—all of which
My friend received with patient courtesy
And sweet forbearance. Plainly she was sure
The Home itself would answer finally
The last of my objections. Always tho',
With gracious readiness would she explain

Whatever point I chanced to commentate;—
Regardless if I praised or deprecated.

Thus when I asked if Vashti's was the type
Predestined, in her mind, to supersede
The home as founded on old-fashioned lines,
She answered:—

"No. We cannot hope to make
This home quite everything a true home should be.
The most our rosiest optimism holds
As possible for one short life's achievement
Is peaceful, sunny, happy garden spot
Where every latent home-creative germ
May be supremely cultured and increased
For future propagation. What if some
Be lost or prove unfruitful?—Nature saves
Not *all* she travaileth for;—and some good seeds
Are destined surely to disseminate
And grow and bloom to beauty and to sweetness.
And then shall come our great and sure reward;
For what tho' fate hath willed that we shall leave
Our field of labor ere its full fruition?
No heaven can hold for us such perfectness
But that the tiniest true love-light that shines
On earth for our increasing, shall enhance
That heaven's transcendent glory. Such our faith—
That living force that forms from future hopes

The present blessing,—ever saving us
From over-anxiousness and fretting fear
For works resultant."
Here she touched a key
To which no conscious chord in me responded.
With aim to make digression and insure
Continuance of her subject, I essayed
This venture, somewhat curious of the issue:—

"While such a life as this must satisfy
Much in the many-sided woman-heart
That home too commonly ignores or stifles,
Does it provide for what is after all
The paramount essential of her nature?
For conjure as we may with natural laws,
Their stern immutability will force
Their final recognition; and the love,
Supreme and single in its potency
To bind and weld in one, two human hearts,—
For purposes that we devoutly trust
Are wise in measure of their mystery,—
Is not that love the very ultimate
Of human nature's fundamental laws?
And if it be, can any mode of life
By which that law is utterly subverted,
Conduce to that complete development
Which seems the aim at Vashti's? I, perchance,

Some point have lost or misinterpreted;
But my impression is that Vashti finds
No place in her curriculum for marriage."

"And partly you are right," she answered me,
"For formal marriage as the world defines it
We hold in slight esteem. Idealists
Cannot indulge in dreams that travesty
Their world of truth and beauty. Dreamers find
A path to Wisdom, straight and plain, but all
Unknown to him whose only guide is reason:
And e'en for him who dreams, the little path
Loseth itself straightway if he give ear
To any voice but Truth's; and truth disowns
The tottering structure that the world calls 'marriage.'
Yet mark me well, for marriage true and real,—
That heaven-ordainèd hallowèd right that ope's
The very gate of Heaven to whom it blesseth,—
Ah! *that* we pray may come, and speedily,
To every soul that Love hath sanctified
To reverently receive its sacred message.

You have observed us keenly and must know
Such women as compose our sisterhood
Could not accept a fraction while the whole

Of human happiness were gainable.
Nor are they such as missing life's most dear
And natural joys, feed disappointed hearts
On sapless sophistry that makes of love
A false, delusive dream of bitter ending.
With all the ardor loving children bring
To task assigned by teacher they adore,
We search that vast, exhaustless scroll—the word—
Direct, divine and simple, straight from God—
Enrolled for us between the leaves of Nature.
No line is left obscure; nor does it fail
To answer, somewhere, life's most intricate
And subtle problems, to the full content
Of most exacting mind. And this is how
We render its plain text concerning marriage;

We would depend. It is the woman's right
To be ensphered, protected, pioneered
By one more fit than she, more free and strong
To map her world; foresee its limits; clear
The large obstructions from her path, that she
May walk in safety and may dwell secure.
For only in such freedom as the man,
By virtue of his manhood may insure
To woman, can her nature so unfold
Its boundless sweetness and its pristine grace
That once again this desert wilderness

Of care-encankered life shall change and bloom
Like Paradise of old for her and him.

Man sees but dimly that great rôle that he
By nature is assigned to fill; and she,
The woman, more acute to feel, but still
Less broad of vision e'en than he, and less
Inclined to careful tracing from effect to cause,
Resents conditions that have circumscribed
And warped her being: strives to break the bounds
That man has set her—limiting himself;
And striving seeks to make that larger world
She longs for—thus usurping that dear right
Of man to serve her.
'Tis not woman's fault
She thus mistakes; nor yet is man to blame
That he discovers not at once wherein
He so has failed to fill her soul's great need.
'Tis woman always who must point the way
To larger life. More quick to feel than man,
And more inclined to question what she feels,
'Tis she who first grows restless when the world
They both have made has served its full intent
And holds no further room for exercise
Of such increase of wisdom, power and strength
As both have therein gained. It is from her
The first command of aspiration sounds.

"Move on" she says; but man is slow to heed
Because for longer is his soul content
With what is well; likewise because more clear
To him stand out the obstacles that bar
The way to further progress. He delays,
And if too long he hesitates and doubts,
The woman cannot choose, for that great force
That moves upon her, but forestall his right
And act, howe'er mistakenly it be.

'Tis failure that most often points the way
To full success; and woman when she strives
To build that great, free, sun-lit, song-filled world
Her soul has glimpsed from some far distant sphere,
Points out unconsciously by those mistakes
She cannot see, the weakness in herself
And in her structure. Also in so far
As she succeeds, she proves the meed of skill
And wisdom she has gathered. Thus the man,
Intently watching her, is learning fast
A threefold lesson: first, a deep respect
For powers she proves herself possessed of;
Next, the possibility of shaping forth
The living shadow of her happy dream,
While through her daring he is quick to see
How puny were the obstacles he feared;

And finally, her weakness teaches him
His glorious strength, and happier lesson still,
Her need of him!
Methinks it cannot be
So far away, the dawn of that glad day
When man must wake to that great privilege
That waits for him,—The building of that world
That woman longs to beautify and grace.
When so he wakes, 'twill be to wrest away
The all too arduous toil from tender hands;
And she most gratefully will yield to him
His own true task and take her rightful place
Close at his side.
"So then," I said, "'twould seem
From all your words imply, that you agree
But partially with certain zealous minds
Among our would-be champions who assert
That no distinction in potential gifts,
Capacities or tastes or fittingness
Inherent lies in sex?"
Her gentle smile
Grew bright with mirth—"the strongest vantage ground
We as a sex possess, it seems to me
Were yielded with that claim. If nature gives
To her strong sons peculiar attributes
Essentially their own, to wield and use

With natural ease which woman at her best
Can but admire and poorly emulate,
What shall be said of *her* distinctive dower
Of special gifts? All sentiment apart,
And vain conceit, can honest reverence
Refuse to grant that woman holds in trust
As heavenly hostage for humanity,
Imperial virtues and rare subtle gifts
That else were sadly lacking to our race?

Where should we look if not to her for truth,
And constancy, and patient sacrifice,
And depth of pure devotion that can lose
Self in some dearer self's far dearer cause,
And glory in the loss and count it gain?
And what were life but one long night of gloom
Had Heaven withheld from her one sacred trust,—
Her power of swift divinement, gift of faith
That sees beyond the spirit-chilling fact:
That holds to life despite the yawning grave,
And fosters in her heart celestial dreams
Of Love and Love's redemption,—such as man
Can never comprehend or call his own
Save thro' his worship of her.
What man is there—
Full-orbed and free, a triune entity,
With heart to feel and intellect to weigh,
And inner eye of spirit to discern,—

What man so heaven-designed but cherisheth
Within his heart of hearts this saving gleam
From the lost star of truth? 'Tis woman leads,
But man in his proud strength must go before
To smooth the way; for so in nature, plain
The law is writ by hand that cannot err.

Perish what will of Life's illusions; sink as may
In Time's abyss the fragile fairy ships
We trust our hopes to; still the wingèd fleets
Of the Ideal shall ne'er be wholly wrecked
Till man forget his fair immortal goal,
And recognize no more in womanhood
The star that shines to light his spirit thither.

The silence deepened round us while the clear
Prophetic voice vibrated thro' and thro'
My inmost being till I felt the light
Of that close-verging world her eloquence
Had barely missed unveiling to my vision.

At last I broke the spell:—"Discern you then
Some sign that heralds this elysium's
Divinely welcome dawning? Is there hope,
However faint, that you and I may see
Sweet peace and harmony evolve from all
This dissonance and din that woman's war
On man's most dear traditions wakes around us?"

The sweet expressive smile gave soft rebuke
To my impatient fervor:—"They who sow
The seed with faith in spring-time, surely they
Shall reap the harvest; what concerns it when
Or how or in what world the field shall ripen?"

Again that overtone of forgiveness
That made me vaguely conscious of remote,
Strange countries where her spirit walked, familiar,
But out of touch with mine. With curious sense
Of jealous loneliness I hastened now
To exorcise the spell, and draw her thoughts
Back to our common world.
She does not know
That here my memory sets a gleaming stone
To mark a cherished epoch in our friendship:
For here it was that first I recognized
In some small measure, what her friendship meant
To my starved, empty life. And also here
My soul began to dimly comprehend
That it must *climb* if it would hope to keep
Within the radius of her spirit's shining.
For souls like hers must seek at intervals
Their native mountain-tops, or soon the dense
Miasma of our lower atmosphere,
Would force them finally from Earth that now—
Poor in such prototypes—so ill could spare them.

But not till after-time, when larger light
And new-born sympathies had tutored me
In many kinds of wisdom, was this truth
Borne in upon me. Now, averse to what
I failed to comprehend in her remoteness,
I questioned, with intent to bring her back
To themes of mutual interest. She at once
Resumed the slackened thread of colloquy:

"No form of oath nor any least restraint
Do we impose on our beloved disciples.
We simply strive to show the wisest course—
As it appears to us—at any turn
In any single life-path; nor attempt,
By arbitrary strictures, to compel
In one direction all the countless roads
Of different destinations that converge
At any single point. Small as it is,
Our group comprises egos so diverse
In character and trend, so positive
In individuation, so defined
And all-complex that intuition needs
Must be alert to keep the master-key
To all the ever-varying combinations.
We give our heart's most sacred energies
To help a soul to find the true key-note,
Caught from the new-born stars, to which is writ
Its grand, eternal life-theme. Once this great,

Heaven-guided work accomplished for a soul,
Thenceforth we leave it free. For love can aid
Only by constant shining, and nowise
By imposition of the freest lines
Of boundary broad intelligence can trace
For any other life's periphery.
We cannot know another's entire need;
And when we foolishly assume that knowledge
Our best-intended efforts work but harm.
This truth must be conceived as the initial step
In understanding that shall show the way
To aid unhinderingly our fellow-creatures.
And we at Vashti's guard most watchfully
Our speech and thought, lest we in anywise
Precipitate or curb another's will,
Judgment or choice;—though of necessity
Our very atmosphere, in some degree,
Is potent to restrain or stimulate.
And here is where the need for watchfulness,
Fasting and ceaseless prayer is ever urgent.
To hold that subtle aura that surrounds
Our spirits always pure and undefiled
By selfish, sordid thoughts; to keep it rare
And vitalized with true celestial fire,
Breathed from the upper worlds; to hallow it
By constant prayer for His inspiring love
And blessing, that we evermore may bear

Glad health and hope to weaker souls and spirits,
And light to gladden dreary, sunless lives,—
Is not such aim, devotedly pursued,
Enough to give the days,—ay, and the nights—
Of faithful souls to unremitting labor?
But thanks to Him who worketh while we sleep.
'Tis not our constant diligence that counts
For spiritual achievement, as the heart's
Sincere, complete and perfect consecration.
To sift the heart's desire, and teach the will
Obedience only to divine command,—
This is our part, the rest we leave to Him."

At last my practical, plain-reasoning mind
Began to glimpse a something tangible
In her clear-shining, transcendental faith
That hitherto—with shame do I confess it—
Had seemed to me a zealot's fantasy,—
An unsubstantial, visionary dream.
I hoped she would continue, for desire
For deeper understanding of her creed
Was strong within me; but apparently
She meant not to resume, and I in doubt
Of how to frame so unaccustomed thoughts,
Reverted to the more familiar subject.

"In this large liberty I plainly see
Much that befits the free intelligence

Of reason-ripe, experience-tutored women.
But what of young, ingenuous, unformed minds,
With all their crude, tumultuous emotions
To understand and guide and regulate,
While judgment still awaits Time's training hand
Or sleeps in embryo? You suffer them,
Unanxiously, these young, fresh-hearted girls,
To find their own right guidance and to choose
Their path in life while ignorant of all
Life's mystery and meaning?"

"Ignorance
As safely as experience can be taught
To walk with calm, unwavering confidence
By intuition's light. The little path
That leads to wisdom's fountain *all* may find,—
If sound of brain and pure of heart and motive,—
And our young girls are early taught the secret.
Nor are they limited as you suppose,
To our small world for range of observation.
They come and go as freely as the birds
That flit 'tween two dear homes and two sweet summers.
For some have fair ancestral roofs, and hearts
Knit by the ties of kin, as well as love,
To fondly shelter them; such come to us
Of natural choice, most cordially approved
Of guardian judgment, their time of sojourning

Depending wholly on their own desires
Or changes natural to life's arrangements.
We let no bonds, not even silken ones,
Fetter the birds that help to make our summer.
But some—not migratory—find with us
Their only home; and such are duly given
The needful taste of other how and where,
By hospitality—not patronage—
Spontaneously and cordially extended
By some world-denizens whose hearts are with us.

Thus you perceive that Vashti's does not aim
To foster ignorance of aught that goes
To round the perfect circle of a life;
For well it knows the beauty and the worth
Of its exhaustless stores of priceless treasure,
Can only be enhanced by sharpened powers,
To weigh, compare, discriminate and value.
And when these young souls choose—thus knowingly—
A life devoted to our sisterhood,
We even then accept no form of pledge;
But bid them bend a reverent-listening ear
To hark the first small whisper that may stir
Within the heart with faint premonishment
Of heirship to some happier waiting kingdom.

But ah, how prayerfully we strive to teach
The heart to *know* that voice, and not mistake

The thousand tongues that so can counterfeit
All but its last inimitable accent!
Love! Love! the mystic syllable that stirred
The soul's first consciousness long ere the suns
Evolved from chaos; Love, the immortal breath
That quickened cold, insensate clay to feel
And worship and reflect its Maker's image!
Love! Love! the first and final utterance
Of system unto system, voiceless borne
Across the vast, abysmal, starless spaces!
And Love, the boundless, quenchless, deathless fire
That leaps unto its own,—world unto world,
Life unto life:—thro' hopeless prison walls
Of dumb, impassive clay, soul unto soul!

Ah! who hath learned to stand with mantled face
And reverent spirit while Love passeth by
And toucheth him, and whispereth to his heart
The long-lost word of magic: lo, his name
Is writ among the eternal stars, to ring
Forever in the songs of seraphim!
How small a word! and yet methinks it holds
The Alpha and Omega of that theme
The soul is set to con thro' endless cycles.
When all is done, and we at last have found
Nirvana—Bliss—Attainment—perfect Rest,
The circle of our blessedness will be

Still filled and bounded by that little word
That babes can lisp and spell into its signs
For us, forever new mysterious meaning.

Then wherefore should we seek so toilsomely
Aught else wherewith to compass this our world,
Or wherefore strive to learn, or to impress
On virgin hearts a word of lesser import?
Love covereth all to whoso measureth
Its minimum of might; or consciously
Respondeth in his spirit to the least
Of all its myriad minor harmonies.
And Vashti's never-ceasing suppliance craves
Its inspiration and full quickening
To every heart her fostering arms enshelter.
Once so inspired and quickened know,
The spirit's safely poised for upward flight
Toward higher realm and purer where the soul
No other language speaks nor comprehends
But Love's great music.

Yearningly
The Mother-heart at Vashti's watches o'er
The youthful neophyte; for mother-love
Is slow to learn that deepest travailing
Cannot avail vicariously to save
Another from her meed of chastening.
And Love's unerring star doth sometimes lead

Thro' pathless deserts where the soul must die
A thousand deaths; for Love's true mission fails
Except it guides the ego finally,—
Thro' hard and desperate issues tho' it be—
Out from the land of bondage. This may be
Not till the tight calyx of our earthlier selves
Bursts with the birth-throes of the struggling spirit;
Or else corrodes away in the salt sea
Of tears and suffering. Earth-bonds hold fast
And many a strong, colossal soul requires
Both means of liberation ere it tastes
The fine elixir of a hard-won freedom.

"Thy will be done!" full reverently we strive
To teach our mother-hearts complete response
To that supremest prayer, when cometh Love—
Divinest courier from the courts of Heaven—
And spiriteth away our fairest flowers
To the great garden of experience.
Not ours the right by smallest obstacle
To hinder this transplanting. For God brooks
No interference with His plans, nor grants
To any soul the power to liberate
Another, from fate's toils.

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"We both were young when marriage came to us.
Love's hand had lightly swept such surface strings

As wake in youthful hearts a melody
All sweet and wild. But silent and untouched
Lay all those deeper chords whose dominants
Base such grave themes and living symphonies
As once evoked go on and ever on
In full vibration, pure and deep and strong,
To lose themselves at last in tones so fine
No ear but Love's can catch the strains divine.

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Now looking back how plainly I perceive
How childish and how selfish were those prayers.
My eager, untaught heart athirst for joy,
Hungry for knowledge, ever crying out
For larger sense of being, richer life
And clearer wisdom, still refused to drink
The cup it so had prayed for:—pushed aside
The hand that held the very food it craved,—
And cried and clamored on. Perverse and blind,
The hot untutored, wilful heart of youth!
It hears no music in the minor chords
Evoked 'neath sorrow's hand. It sees no light
Save in the gay, glad smile of happiness,
Nor will believe that it may find its joy
Save by the ways of joy. In vain for me
The food that giveth life was daily spread
In lavish plenty. Still I prayed for bread

And starved and anguished on, I wanted back
The glamour of that care-free morning-time.

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Sometimes the Father suffers us to walk
A little way in some mistaken path
We think is duty; nor will turn aside
Our footsteps till unto the utmost tried
Our strength deserts us and our will forsakes.
But never purposeless are these mistakes.
For this and this alone it seems to me
The loving wisdom suffers them to be:
That feeling all our weakness we may grasp
More firm the hand that holds us in its clasp:
That painful consciousness of erring sight
May force us nearer to the perfect light,
Whose rays, perchance, piercing our hearts may show
The lurking self that did mislead us so,—
A self that undiscovered might become
A power to lure us farther yet from home.
How apt are we in our impatient moods
To think the ways circuitous and slow
By which we're led to wisdom needless be;
That we a clearer light, path more direct
Could better bear. But strangely we forget
The winding roads and many, bramble-grown,

That leading from our hearts our feet have worn
With wilful straying.
Till by homesickness
And longing, pain and thirst that nothing else
Can cure, is born the will to line a path
Direct for home till we: grown strong and staunch
In singleness of heart, can hew it smooth
And strictly walk therein, nor let our feet
Be lured aside by winding shady ways.
'Twere all unwise our footsteps to compel
Through paths too straitly struck. The thorns would tear
And pierce us till in anguish and despair
The lofty aspiration would be quenched:—
The unformed soul from fostering spirit wrenched."

She paused, and like some softly-molded sphynx
Sat silent with that rapt, far-seeing look
That came so oft into her deep true eyes;
While o'er her face there stole the white high light
That made her look as Beatricia might.

What heights and depths her spirit compassed when
My Sœur Marie looked so, I cannot say—
For always o'er me came a hush of awe;

And for the moment I too seemed to be
Merged into formless truth's infinity.

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Gently and reverently as one would lift
The lid to gaze upon a coffined face,
I turned those sacred leaves. O white, white leaves!
O consecrated book! And can ye still
Be less than breathing, sensate things, to hold
So long shut here to silentness the cries
Wrung from that pearl-pure heart?—And I, dear heart,
I dreamed that I had suffered;—blamed swift fate
That cut me off, at one sharp, sudden stroke
From all I loved.—How sweetly merciful!—
I know it now. Ah! Sœur Marie, thine agony,
Drawn thro' the length of lingering days that saw
Thy wifely love slow-tortured to its death,
Has taught my coward soul what mean the words
"To suffer and be strong!"
On each brief page,
In nervous hand, the rough staccato lines
Were palely pencil-traced, as if they stood
For muffled sobs, the heart they welled from meant
Should reach no keenest ear. And as I read
My own heart wellnigh broke, and blinding tears
Ran down like rain as if to wash away
The print of torturing nails and cruel spear
That so had crucified a woman's heart.

O, pitying God! To stand thus helpless by
And see a soul in Thine own image formed,
Fling down Thy highest gifts beneath his feet
And trample them as swine will trample lilies!

And can I nothing, then, impart to him
Of strength or wisdom, or abiding wish
To choose the better portion?
Then wherefore is love born between two souls
To weld them close till one can know no hurt
And not the other, if the tenuous bonds
No force can sever, prove but ropes of sand
When desperately we try their treacherous strength
To draw our own aback from death or danger?

And what availeth prayer? Have I not asked
In faith and humbleness, of thee, O Heaven,
A boon that Love itself would sanctify
To good ineffable? Have I craved aught
In selfishness or worldliness of spirit?
O Holy Father, keep thro' Thine own name,
Those whom Thou gavest me! And from the world
Of evil keep Thou them! So even He,
The sinless One, did pray for His belovèd.
And wert thou dumb to Him, O Heaven, as now
Thou art to me?
Ah! Christ, thou patient Christ!
Thou all compassionate,—and was it thus

Thy heart—that deep, true heart, the tenderest
That ever ached for suffering, sinful world,—
Was hurt when Judas kist thee?
Nay, Master, not like this, for Thou
Could'st ne'er have loved depraved Iscariot so!

And yet they say of me that I am cold—
Not tender, soft or warm, as women are
Who are less strong!—Well, if to feel
And suffer thus is to be hard and cold,
And lacking woman's tenderness and warmth,
Then make me, Heaven, as soft as molten wax,
As warm as unslant ray of noonday sun,
That when a hand again shall stab my heart,
The cleanly-cloven parts together straight
Shall melt, and leave no scar!

And it has come—the worst has come at last!
Tho' I have prayed and prayed that Thou would'st spare
Me this! I said—and meant it too—that I would bear
Whatever else might come; and all the past,
Thou knowest full patiently I bore,—but oh!
Not this! not this! O, tender, watchful care
That's promised to Thy least of creatures, where
Shall they whom Thou forsakest thenceforth go
With their petitions? O Love! O Fatherhood,

In which I trusted! I call to Thee! I grope
The dark that closes round me. Still must I hope
That Thou art somewhere near—art still all-good,
All-wise, all-kind.
Henceforth alone,—alone,
Asking no aid, no light; I take my way
Unguided thro' the night,—no longer *pray*,
Since prayer can fail, and God forget His own!

A vast, bare, hopeless reach. Ah! shuddering soul,
Must we two cross that pitiless expanse,
Where foot hath never trod, nor eye explored,
Nor voice disturbed its silence? Must we learn
What felt the "Man of Sorrows," desert-bound,
Those forty fasting days? The "Man of Sorrows!"
What man of other sort did ever walk
A lifetime thro' on this forsaken earth?
"He bore our griefs!" How helps it, since ourselves
Their whole unmitigated, toilsome weight
Must bear, with none to lighten? "He takes away
The sins of the world. 'Sins of the world.'"
How long
Alas! how long prayed we that He would take
Sin from a single heart? Availed it aught?
"If thou hast faith." Ah had we not?—such faith
As little lisping child's, that nightly craves
Thy loving care at reverent mother's knee.

Poor superstition! Myth-born fantasy
That lures the trusting soul and tempts away
From Reason's well-springs? Vain, delusive dream
That snares our hearts, and makes us cringing slaves
While joy abideth, only to betray
And leave us desolate of prop or guide
When sorrow comes, or stress of suffering.
Farewell, false faith. Better the arid waste,
With burning heat and thirst, since they be *real*,
Than all thy fair, chimeric promises
That ashes turn at touch of mortal needs.

So it doth seem, thou soul of mine, that we
Can keep a certain life within us ev'n here,
Where is no throb of life nor sign that aught
Takes cognizance that we are still in being.
I had not thought that one could even be
And God be not! Well, so much have we gained
Of knowledge, thou and I, and nevermore
Again need fear that aught can nihilate
Pure consciousness, or rob us of each other.

What think'st thou, do the dead—the chilled in blood
And nerve and brain—the dead that do not walk—
Do they lie thus? Does thought go on, and sight,
And memory, keen and clear and absolute,
Tho' irrelate, and all divorced from feeling?

Where then must go the throbs of passion? Where
The fierce, unslaked ambitions? Whither flees
The proud, imperious will when round a heart
Death's icy finger circles?
'Tis a state
Well worth attaining, this, methinks, where all
The clear, gray sea of thought and reason lies
Unrippled by the winds of will or wishing.

How many hundred æons since, my soul,
Think'st thou we dreamed that God and Love were all
Of Life? Poor feverish dream! 'Tis past, thank
God!—
What's that? Thank *God?* Thank GOD? Why,
God is not!
God? God? O heart, be still! Wake not again
To feel and torture me. Dost thou not know
A heart should break but once and after that
Forever-more be quiet? God? God?—that voice!—
What! *thou*, my soul! That voice in *thee!* In
THEE!—

Forgive! Forgive! I knew Thee not. I thought—
What was't I thought?
And Thou hast never left me?
Not e'en that time when no light was, nor hope
Nor any touch of comfort? What? 'Twas *Thou?*—
Thyself?—the dark, the pain, the blank despair?

O blind, that thought to know thy soul, nor knew
The Christ that bideth in thee!
O blessèd grief!
O bliss of sorrowing that brought me thus
In very truth to know Thee! Never more—
Ah! never—never more depart Thou from me.
Keep Thou me near, nor let this heart again
Refuse to feel, or make some poor response
When Thy dear Master-hand shall deign to touch
Its dormant strings and thrill them into music.

For long I sat enwrapt in revery,
The little book close-clasped in hands that throbbed
And thrilled with sympathy, whose depths till now
My heart nor guessed nor dreamed. The o'er-full past
I lived again,—my own and Sœur Marie's;—
For strangely blent in close coincidence
Of trend and circumstance, our lives had seemed
Like twin-born streams to take their prescient course
Sure of the destined point of final meeting.

Dear, white-souled Sœur Marie! I knew her now,
The brave, sweet, pure-aspiring "other self,"
Whose image deep subconscious memory
Had kept safe-guarded from my skeptic-veiled,
Doubt-shrouded inner vision. Yet how had that
So silent memory haunted! Disheartened oft,

With homesick longing had I turned away
From one whose smile or accent stirred in me
A moment's thrill of hope, to chide myself
For foolish vague expectance. Still I harked
Again and yet again for that dear voice,
And waited for that smile that should betray
The friend I yearned for—friend who should reflect
Myself, but truer;—friend whose heart should hold,
If not more love than mine, yet purer faith
And larger charity; whose life should be
My highest dreams of virtue realized;
Whose spirit should infold my own and lend
The needful strength and buoyancy, and large,
Calm courage to inspire my energies
To scale the heights of holiest aspiration.
Yet, tho' I waited thus, half-consciously,
Thro' all my earlier years: when Time at last
Brought fuller answer to the unvoiced prayer
Than my half-hearted faith had dared prevision,
So grief-engrained was I, so doubt-involved
And self-absorbed, the gift I coveted
Had long been mine ere woke the recognition.
But ah! I knew her now at last—*my friend*,
Whose patient love, despite my slow response,
Had won me from myself, had set me free
From cold inertia's clutch and led me far
Along the path to Wisdom. Yes, far on

And up that path must I unknowingly
Have climbed; for lo! the valley where her love
Had found me, stretched in dimness far below
The sun-kissed summits of my blessèd present.—
Blessèd? even so, for revelation, sure
And silent as the swiftly coming dawn
Broke o'er my musing spirit. Like a voice
From out the little book—soundless but clear—
This message thrilled me: "O blind, that think'st to know
Thy friend, thy better self, yet knowest not
'Where two or three be gathered in my name,
Together, there am I.'" A mighty wave
Of light and understanding, thrilled with the ache
Of Love ineffable, swept over me.
I bowed my head upon the little book
And all the frozen deeps within me melted;
That well-known voice, my Sœur Marie, myself—
Where had I dreamt this blessèd dream before—
On what Love-radiant star? A second's space
I glimpsed that dear, adored familiar heaven,
In banishment forgotten, yet enshrined
Deep in the spirit's deathless memory.—
I saw myself a dear, belovèd child
Whose place within that many-mansioned Home
Was mine from Time's beginning—must be mine
Thro' all eternity. No other soul—

However accounted worthier than I—
By any chance could fill. There must be
A vacant place forever, well I knew,
Till of my own volition I should choose
To claim my priceless, waiting heritage.
Ah, the love! the love that so could cherish
An erring, wayward, wilful-straying child
Thro' cycles of indifference and forgetting!
Where now the doubting heart, the wary, cold,
Keen, skeptic reason? Where the bitterness
That spurned the thought of wise Beneficence
Behind the ruthless fate that worsted me
And robbed me of my blindly worshipped idols.
A gentle step, a touch upon my hand,
No need for speech; a meeting of the eyes
And that was told that all the eloquence
Of myriad tongues must still have left unuttered.

Together there, beneath the dear old pine,
We stood and watched the sun sink slowly down
Beyond the purple hills, and with it sank
The old grief-wrecked, doubt-freighted, useless life
Into oblivion's sea. And with the red,
Gold harvest moon and tremulous evening star
Uprose my soul, re-born and purified.

'Tis years agone, and still the fadeless light
That dawned for me that far off blessèd day

Shines on undimmed. With deep abiding peace
I dwell among my chosen sisters, far
From the world's troubled dream; and when the path
Traced for my feet leads back among the sad,
Sick hearts that know not of the blessèd balm
That healed my own, still trustfully I follow;—
For well I know that work the Father's love
Hath sent His angel Sorrow to prepare
For those who seek to know and do His will:
Nor is it asked of me in loneliness
To sow the seed and patiently await
Apart from human sympathy the harvest.
For wheresoe'er His dear hand guideth me
Not far away walks gentle Sœur Marie.

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Where'er Thou wilt: I follow.—'Tis enough
That Thou hast walked this way. I will not seek
To trace the path beyond the single step
Before my feet. Tho' hard and steep, or drear
And waste and desolate, I cannot fear.
Thy love surroundeth me. Lead Thou me on.

THE END.